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ABSTRACT

This report presents guidelines for secondary school principals for including students with disabilities in large scale educational assessments. In the summer of 2001, a focus group of 13 administrators were brought together to share these promising practices for ensuring that students with disabilities participate in state and district-wide assessments of achievement and that their scores be counted in reform efforts. The guidelines include: (1) put curriculum at the center of all efforts by setting high academic expectations for students with disabilities, encouraging personnel to view the general curriculum as serving all students, and providing professional development on meeting diverse students' needs; (2) help school personnel and parents understand assessment accommodations, affirm that accommodations are acceptable, and encourage school personnel to consider first accommodations that enable self-sufficient performance by the students; (3) monitor alternative assessments, provide professional development about alternative assessments, and encourage best practices to be used; and (4) use assessment results to improve school practices by analyzing performance gaps between special and general education students and aligning funding, resources, and staffing to leverage student outcomes school wide and district wide. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act regulations pertaining to student participation in large scale assessments are provided. (CR)

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Including Students with Disabilities in Large Scale Assessments: A Necessary Element of School Reform Efforts

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Including Students with Disabilities in Large Scale Assessments: A Necessary Element of School Reform Efforts

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Are you doing all you can to ensure that students with disabilities participate in State and district-wide assessments, with accommodations as needed? Does your accountability system include students with disabilities when reporting accomplishments?

State and district-wide assessments provide a means for students to be counted in reform efforts. Including **all** students in large scale assessment programs is one way administrators can help to ensure a high quality educational experience for each student. Administrators need to know how successful they are in preparing all students to meet high standards. Parents need this information as well.

Up until recently, however, students with disabilities frequently were excluded from participating in large scale assessments, and thus were rarely included in school reform efforts. The reauthorization of the 1997 reauthorization of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) changed that. Federal law now requires:

- Students with disabilities to participate in general State and district-wide assessment programs, with appropriate accommodations if necessary as determined by the IEP team. 34 C.F.R. §300.347(a)(5).
- Alternate assessments to be provided for students who have been determined by their IEP teams as being unable to participate in the general assessment program. 34 C.F.R. §300.138.

- The performance results of children with disabilities to be reported to the public just as performance results are reported for all children, so long as the reporting method will not result in identifying the performance of individual children. 34 C.F.R. §300.139.

How are secondary school principals responding to these relatively new federal requirements? Read on to find out how your colleagues are using IDEA regulations as a way to create a positive experience for all students and faculty, while at the same time ensuring that students with disabilities are part of reform efforts?

Secondary School Principals Identify Promising Practices

As the Practitioner in Residence for Special Education at the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), I am charged with providing members with the latest research and practice on complex special education issues affecting administrators' work. To this end, I set out to discover how secondary school administrators were responding to IDEA requirements for including students with disabilities in large scale assessments.

Based on data from a national electronic survey of NASSP members I conducted earlier this year, I knew that secondary school administrators generally feel challenged in this area. Over half of those administrators who responded to the survey reported that their staff had little or just barely sufficient knowledge to support the participation of students with disabilities in State and district-wide assessment programs.

However, the data also suggested that more than one third of administrators believed that they and their staff had more than sufficient knowledge to tackle this issue. I decided to locate administrators who were successfully supporting the participation of students with disabilities in State and district-wide assessments and ask them to share what was working in their districts.

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In the summer of 2001, I brought together a group of administrators* from across the nation. The focus group met with representatives from NASSP, the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE), and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) to share compelling ideas and promising practices for ensuring that students with disabilities participate in State and district-wide assessments of achievement—and that their scores be counted in reform efforts.

Following is a summary of what focus group members told us. [For a copy of the full report, contact the author at NASSP.] It is important to note that focus group participants did not strive to reach consensus in their perspectives, but rather to share a variety of ideas drawn from their individual experiences and expertise.

Put Curriculum at the Center of All Efforts

Make quality education the goal

rather than getting students to pass exams.

Focus Group Member

At the core of most reform efforts is the goal of improving results for all students. Overwhelmingly, focus group members underscored the importance of offering *all* students a rigorous, high quality curriculum that is aligned to State and local standards. They stressed that care must be taken to ensure that what is tested reflects a standards-based curriculum, and that the written curriculum is aligned with instruction. Only then is "teaching to the test" justifiable.

If students with disabilities are to participate successfully in State and district-wide assessments, they must have access to the general curriculum. In other words, it makes no sense to assess them—or any students for that matter—on things that they have not been taught.

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Secondary school principals can use the curriculum as a focus to support the participation of students with disabilities in the State or district-wide assessment program by working with school staff and other stakeholders to:

- **Set high academic expectations for students with disabilities**. Everyone should believe that students with disabilities will achieve in classrooms and on assessments. Teach the same testing indicators as all students.
- **Encourage personnel to view the general curriculum as serving all students**. Procedures can be created that assist staff in carrying out this goal (e.g., when IEP teams determine that a student cannot benefit from the general curriculum, they must document and explain their position).
- **Provide professional development on meeting diverse students needs**. A good curriculum cannot overcome the effects of an unqualified or unskilled teacher. Make sure teachers have access to multiple opportunities to improve their skills and increase their knowledge.
- **Develop pacing guides**. These guides assist teachers in exposing students to information that will be tested by providing specific instructional objectives each 6-8 week period that reflect assessment content. Give students quarterly predictor tests and adjust instruction accordingly.
- **Design a student progress tracking system** (e.g., computerized system). The system should provide ongoing information that teachers can use to plan and inform instruction.
- **Re-teach test information**. When students are not successful, provide instructional aid and assistance to students and teachers. Shift the paradigm from the "student against the teacher" to "it's us (teacher and student) against the test." Offer afterschool and summer programs that build student skills.

- **Teach students how to take tests**. Students should be familiar with the format of any district-wide or State assessment. Allow students sufficient practice time with assessments. Develop a testing committee with parents, teachers, and students charged with identifying strategies that effectively prepare students for testing.
- **Recruit parents to help**. In the effort to raise student performance, provide parents with suggestions for how they may reinforce learning in the home.
- **Rely on the individualized education program** (IEP). The IEP provides a mechanism to support students who may be at-risk of failing high-stakes tests. Encourage IEP teams to consider supports and services the student may need to succeed.
- **Inform legislators when test items or areas of emphasis are inappropriate**. State politicians and/or the legislature need to assess and evaluate their assessment decisions based on student outcomes and what is in students' best interest. To do this, they need reliable and concrete information. Tell them what should be changed. Identify test questions that may be culturally biased.

Help School Personnel and Parents Understand Assessment Accommodations

Students with disabilities who use accommodations are expected to achieve to the same high standards as their nondisabled peers.

Focus Group Member

Participation in State and district-wide assessments may require the use of assessment accommodations or modifications in administration. Assessment accommodations and modifications are alterations in the way a test is administered or how a student

responds, that do not provide an unfair advantage. Providing accommodations to students who need them increases the number of students with disabilities who can take district and State assessments and thus be included in the accountability system—yet another way to ensure that all students are part of reform efforts.

Focus group members pointed out that although instructional personnel have been making classroom accommodations for students for some time now, formalizing the process for large scale assessments presents new administrative challenges. Leadership is needed to ensure that students with disabilities receive the accommodations that they need, that school personnel are supported in implementing the accommodations, and that parents understand the purpose of making accommodations for certain students. This starts with helping school staff members and other stakeholders understand assessment accommodations. Specifically, principals can:

- **Affirm that accommodations are acceptable**. Most States provide lists of acceptable accommodations, which should be made available to school personnel. Show interest by asking staff members questions about the accommodations they are using.
- **Encourage school personnel to consider first accommodations that enable self-sufficient performance by the student**. Examples include a speech activated word processor rather than an individual who serves as a scribe, and tape recorded questions rather than an individual who reads to student.
- **Make sure all accommodations are written in the student's individualized education program (IEP)**. Students should use all recommended accommodations as part of their daily instruction. They should never use an accommodation for the first time during a district-wide or State assessment.
- **Provide professional development sessions on accommodating diverse learning needs**. Much has been written about the benefits of different accommodations. Make

sure instructional staff, students, and parents have sufficient understanding of accommodations to make reasonable decisions. Also, provide training to instructional staff, students, and parents as appropriate in how to implement and use selected accommodations.

- **Purchase accommodations as needed**. Include training costs for students, instructional staff, and parents, as appropriate.
- **Develop a system for monitoring accommodations**. The system should track for each student classification, accommodations required, and information regarding implementation.

Monitor Alternative Assessments

For a low percentage of students with disabilities, participation may require an alternate State or district assessment. Administrators must be aware of best practices related to these assessments.

Focus Group Member

Alternate assessments provide a mechanism for students who cannot participate in standard State and district-wide assessments, even with accommodations, to participate in the accountability system. This enables all students, including those who may not be participating in the general curriculum, to still be part of reform efforts. IEP teams determine which students will participate in alternate assessments.

Presently, many States and districts are grappling with the alternative assessment provision in IDEA. IDEA provides that, as appropriate, the State or local education agency will develop guidelines for the participation of children with disabilities in alternate assessments for those children who cannot participate in State and district-wide

assessment programs. IDEA does not address the criteria IEP teams should use in determining which children cannot participate in State or district-wide assessments of student achievement.

Focus group members acknowledged that few school districts have experience conducting alternative assessments. Thus, unless principals are involved in large-scale development of an alternative assessment, their major responsibility will be to build knowledge and support implementation. To this end, secondary school principals can:

- **Provide professional development**. Instructional staff need to be fully informed about alternate assessments.
- **Encourage best practices to be used**. Principals should monitor the number of students taking alternative assessments. Craft knowledge suggests that overidentification of students with disabilities for alternative assessment may have negative effects, including: perpetuating a second system of education; adding significant costs; resulting in less accountability by the school system for their educational progress.

Use Assessment Results To Improve School Practices

Be careful how data is used.

Ask, "Is it useful? Is it real? Is it accurate?"

Focus Group Member

The performance results of children with disabilities must be reported to the public just as performance results are reported for all children, so long as the reporting method will not result in identifying the performance of individual children. It is important to report the scores of children with disabilities so they are included in reform efforts and so they are able to demonstrate performance in the general education curriculum.

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Focus group members emphasized the potential usefulness of disaggregated data for measuring school improvement, curriculum gaps and coherency, program success, teacher evaluation, student progress, and student placement decisions. For example, secondary school principals can use student data on large scale assessments to:

- Determine if goals are being achieved by students.
- Identify students who are not performing at standard so that strategies to address deficiencies may be developed.
- Identify teachers who are using successful instructional strategies that can be shared with other faculty.
- Explore issues that may be affecting certain groups of students, such as the over-representation of minority and low socio-economic status students in special education and suspension programs.
- Inform the design of professional development programs that supports teachers in providing appropriate instruction that meets students' needs.
- Analyze any performance gaps between special education students and general education students, so that measures can be undertaken to decrease any that exist.
- Align funding, resources, and staffing to leverage student outcomes school wide and district wide.

To assist secondary school administrators in using data, focus group members suggested the following practices:

- Develop a year of entry cohort (all students entering 9th grade in a given year) to track the progress of a specific group of students over time, rather than grade level comparisons of different children.
- Generate data and aggregate it by race, ethnicity, gender and grade level.

- Disaggregate data of special education students. Have special education and general education teachers review students with disabilities' test results and develop appropriate instruction.
- Give incentives and/or bonuses to schools or teachers who show growth and improvement on assessment tests.
- Acknowledge mastery levels for good schools and students, rather than passing rates.
- Store data for comparative research and statistical analysis of a given school or grade level.
- Maintain test results for students with disabilities in a single format that is easy to access when making year-to-year comparisons easier.
- Facilitate discussions about student data with school faculty and other stakeholders.

Finally, focus group members discussed the importance of reporting data. The goal is to inform all stakeholders—especially parents—about student progress. When presenting data that includes the scores of students with disabilities, secondary school principals can enhance understanding by:

- Providing a report card or flyer to the community regarding all student performance.
- Creating bar graphs in school newsletters that visually presents test data.
- Using a question and answer format when explaining the testing process and data analysis.
- Helping parents and other stakeholders understand the value of including the test scores for students with disabilities.

Summary

As part of school reform efforts, educational leaders need to know how successful they are in preparing all students to meet high

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standards. The 1997 IDEA requirements support administrators in ensuring that all students are counted in school reform. Although making the required changes can prove challenging, as focus group members showed, the results can be beneficial.

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SIDEBAR

IDEA Regulations Pertaining to Student Participation in Large Scale Assessments

34 C.F.R. §300.138 — Participation in assessments

The State must have on file with the Secretary information to demonstrate that—

(a) Children with disabilities are included in general State and district-wide assessment programs, with appropriate accommodations and modifications in administration, if necessary;

(b) As appropriate, the State or LEA—

(1) Develops guidelines for the participation of children with disabilities in alternate assessments for those children who cannot participate in State and district-wide assessment programs;

(2) Develops alternate assessments in accordance with paragraph (b)(1) of this section; and

(3) Beginning not later than, July 1, 2000, conducts the alternate assessments described in paragraph (b)(2) of this section.

(Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1412(a)(17)(A))

34 C.F.R. §300.139 — Reports relating to assessments

(a) **General**. In implementing the requirements of §300.138, the SEA shall make available to the public, and report to the public with the same frequency and in the same detail as it reports on the assessment of nondisabled children, the following information:

(1) The number of children with disabilities participating-

(i) In regular assessments; and

(ii) In alternate assessments.

(2) The performance results of the children described in paragraph (a)(1) of this section if doing so would be statistically sound and would not result in the disclosure of performance results identifiable to individual children-

(i) On regular assessments (beginning not later than July 1, 1998); and

(ii) On alternate assessments (not later than July 1, 2000).

(b) **Combined reports**. Reports to the public under paragraph (a) of this section must include-

(1) Aggregated data that include the performance of children with disabilities together with all other children; and

(2) Disaggregated data on the performance of children with disabilities.

(c) **Timeline for disaggregation of data**. Data relating to the performance of children described under paragraph (a)(2) of this section must be disaggregated-

(1) For assessments conducted after July 1, 1998; and

(2) For assessments conducted before July 1, 1998, if the State is required to disaggregate the data prior to July 1, 1998.

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(Authority: 20 U.S.C. 612(a)(17)(B))

34 C.F.R. §300.347(a)(5)—Content of the IEP

(a) General. The IEP for each child with a disability must include—

(5)

(i) A statement of any individual modifications in the administration of State or district-wide assessments of student achievement that are needed in order for the child to participate in the assessment; and

(ii) If the IEP team determines that the child will not participate in a particular State or district-wide assessment of student achievement (or part of an assessment), a statement of—

(A) Why that assessment is not appropriate for the child; and

(B) How the child will be assessed.

(Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1414(d)(1)(A) and (d)(6)(A)(ii))

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*Footnote

The focus group was composed of the following individuals: Evelyn Gainous, Odette Redd, Sue Gertner, James Gregory, Robin Calitri, John Golden, Okpara Nosehkere, Ginger Hollowell, Lius "Ray" Burrola, Helen Jones, Leah Humphrey, Rosa Aronson, and Betty Greene-Bryant. Rhonda Tyree facilitated the group.